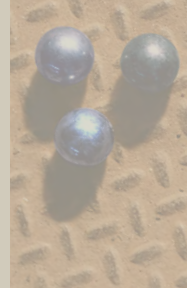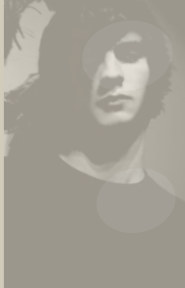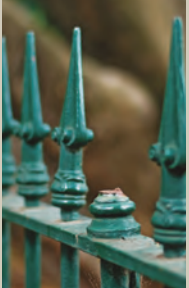# SPOTLIGHT ON PATH PRACTICES AND PROGRAMS

Program Focus:
PATH Programs Providing SOAR:
SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery

August 3, 2009

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES • USA

PATH

Projects for Assistance in
Transition from Homelessness

Disclaimer

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Available: http://pathprogram.samhsa.gov

http://homeless.samhsa.gov

Contact: path@samhsa.hhs.gov

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WHAT IS SOAR?

Access to mainstream benefits is crucial for transitioning out of homelessness. It is estimated that 10-15% of individuals experiencing homelessness are eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) (Policy Research Associates, 2008)—benefits which provide income to support individuals who are not able to work due to disability. Once these benefits are in place, most recipients also become eligible for health care through either Medicaid or Medicare. Individuals are eligible for SSDI if they are determined disabled and have paid into social security through past employment. SSI eligibility is based on a disabling condition and need.

Application processes for SSI and SSDI are complicated and require extensive documentation that even individuals who are housed may have difficulty completing. Those who live on the street or in shelters often do not have the skills or access to the resources necessary to complete the application process. Homeless services workers can, and do, assist with applications, but sometimes without a strong understanding of the application and determination process. Even they have difficulty with the process and have low rates of success.

SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) is an initiative designed to improve access to SSI and SSDI for people experiencing homelessness and have a disabling condition, specifically individuals with mental illness. Some states that have 10-year-plans receive federally supported training and technical assistance for SOAR through a partnership of multiple federal agencies. Other states fund SOAR on their own, sometimes with PATH funds.

SOAR has several components, but when most people think of SOAR they think of the Stepping Stones to Recovery training. This training provides comprehensive training on the eligibility rules, application process, clinical and functional documentation, and strategies for communicating with both Social Security and the agency that is making the medical disability determination. The training significantly improves the worker's ability to complete successful SSI/SSDI applications and avoid appeals.

Stepping Stones to Recovery "train the trainer" events are held several times each year, the provide an opportunity for states to increase the number of availble skilled trainers. These trainers are then expected to bring the information back to their communities and train more individuals to apply what they learned. Policy Research Associates, Inc. (PRA) is the primary provider of Stepping Stones to Recovery training and train the trainer events. PRA also provides technical assistance to communities on implementing SOAR. The SOAR technical assistance process promotes collaboration among organizations and stakeholders to achieve successfully apply. This includes access to medical and service records, communication among those involved with the application, strategic planning, follow-up assistance to the training, and tracking outcomes.

As of early 2008, more than 230 individuals from across the country have attended the

> " *We are blending funding streams to connect all three pieces of the puzzle. We have a PATH case manager who does outreach and case management and we will have a benefits specialist who will focus primarily on the application. The PATH case manager is in constant contact with the consumer and the benefits specialist is going to be in constant contact with the case manager to learn about the functional limitations of the individual. The benefits specialist will then translate that information into the medical summary report format.* "

— Jennifer Alfredson
Mental Health Supervisor
of Case Management
Healthcare for the Homeless
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Stepping Stones to Recovery train the trainer events. They have brought training back to their communities and have implemented SOAR in many different settings. SOAR efforts vary from state to state and program to program. In this Spotlight, you will find examples of how PATH programs have participated in the implementation and delivery of SOAR on the state level and within individual programs.

EXAMPLES OF HOW PATH PROGRAMS WORK WITH SOAR

State Level SOAR Efforts

State of Georgia PATH Program

In Georgia, two staff are designated to work on SOAR at the state level. In addition to carrying a caseload, these individuals are responsible for coordinating trainings, compiling a provider coalition newsletter, tracking outcomes and data, and organizing collaborations. This structure allows for effective follow-up technical assistance to SOAR sites and creates the sense of a SOAR community, even though programs are scattered throughout the state.

PATH funds are used to support the two state SOAR positions, SOAR trainings, and SOAR technical assistance. All PATH programs that provide case management services are expected to use SOAR techniques in their work. In most programs, staff apply SOAR strategies to their regular work, and one team has a benefits specialist.

State of Michigan PATH Program

The State PATH Contact for Michigan is also the state SOAR Coordinator. She works with a state implementation team of key stakeholders and coordinators from each region to oversee the project. Forty-one individuals are Stepping Stones to Recovery trainers, and over 600 people have been trained statewide. In addition to assisting individuals in applying for benefits, the trainers are expected to provide trainings in their region.

One hundred percent of Michigan's PATH programs are actively using SOAR. Programs are expected to complete a total of 12 applications annually for each full-time-equivalent staff person who works on PATH. Currently, two of Michigan's PATH programs have full time staff designated to focus on benefits, while in other programs staff are expected to embed SOAR into regular interactions with consumers. Since the implementation of SOAR, Michigan has experienced a 78% success rate for SOAR applications.

" *Providing training for all disciplines to coordinate pre-release work has been instrumental. All of the levels of staff including the psychiatrists, psychologist, nurses, social workers, and pre-release coordinators--have an influence on the documentation. We try to bring everyone together and help them understand why documentation is important for SOAR.*"

— Sue Smith
Associate Director
Center for Urban Community Services
New York

Program Level SOAR Efforts

Healthcare for the Homeless Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Wisconsin is not officially a SOAR state, but with some help from the state and Health Care for the Homeless (HCH), three individuals have attended the Stepping Stones to Recovery train the trainer sessions and have offered local trainings. After individuals attended the initial Stepping Stones to Recovery training, the state of Wisconsin put out a Request for

Proposals for small grants to implement SOAR. HCH Milwaukee was awarded one of these grants. The funding provides for a portion of a SOAR designated staff, and HCH is in the early stages of hiring for that position.

In order to implement SOAR with the funds they were awarded, HCH Milwaukee plans to partner a benefits specialist funded by the grant with their PATH team. PATH workers will conduct outreach and case management, while the benefits specialist will focus solely on completing applications. The PATH team and benefits specialist will communicate regularly since the PATH team has the established relationship with consumers, and can assist in keeping consumers connected with the benefits specialist during the application process. In addition to preparing for this position, HCH Milwaukee is researching private grants in the area and is working with a hospital in order to secure funding to implement the SOAR model with an interdisciplinary team of outreach workers, case managers, and benefits specialists.

Bridgeway Center, Inc., Florida

In Fort Walton Beach, Florida, there are no shelters. Outreach is the only available case management service. Bridgeway Center employs one outreach worker trained in SOAR. She is well-known among people experiencing homelessness, and through informal conversations often identifies eligibility for SSI/SSDI.

SOAR was a perfect addition to PATH outreach at Bridgeway. While the outreach worker had relationships with clients and knew that they needed benefits, she did not have a structure in place to move forward with applying. She paired the SOAR principles with her engagement skills to craft an approach that works for her.

Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS), New York

The Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS) applies SOAR to a mental health unit in a New York state correctional facility. This strategy helps individuals leave with benefits and service connections rather than being discharged to the streets. Some inmates with serious mental illness in other correctional facilities are referred to this 30 bed unit as a last stop before returning to the community. All of the information for the SSI/SSDI application is drawn from prison notes and conversations with staff. The distance from the clients forces the benefits specialist to think about the application in the same way that reviewers will read the application. Because this unit is the last stop for individuals leaving a state correctional facility, a coordinated post-release team keeps in contact with them when they leave to complete unfinished approvals and ensure access to services.

The CUCS SOAR program is supported by PATH. In addition to implementing the program, CUCS also provides statewide technical assistance to correctional facilities to help them begin to implement SOAR. Technical assistance includes handouts, meetings to coordinate offices and streamline the SOAR process, and training on how to document cases so benefits specialists can extract the information they need. Many of these materials can be accessed in the resources section of this document.

HOW TO APPLY SOAR: TIPS FROM PATH PROGRAMS

Additional technical assistance is necessary

When the training is over and staff return to their organizations, it is useful to have someone who they can turn to when questions arise. In some states, the state coordinator is the appropriate contact, while other states, such as Georgia, have individuals designated to provide technical assistance for SOAR.

Take the application process at the consumer's pace

Some people will need time to engage with the PATH worker before they are ready to apply for benefits. It is important that the PATH worker allow the consumer to set the pace. When the time is right, PATH workers can meet the person in a setting that is comfortable for them.

Organization and accountability are key to getting off to a good start

Some individuals who have received SOAR training are not completing SSI or SSDI applications. Sometimes this is because staff do not have time to complete benefits applications. Other reasons may include a lack of a community plan to clarify roles and responsibilities. Clear structures should be in place at both the state and local level so efforts can be coordinated and effective.

Keep SOAR staff connected to one another

Staff who work alone or are the only SOAR-trained staff in an organization may feel isolated or disconnected from the SOAR

initiative. A monthly newsletter with quick tips and information about what programs are doing is a great way to keep SOAR fresh and relevant for all SOAR trained staff. The state of Georgia uses electronic newsletters to keep trainees, advocates, and stakeholders connected.

> " *I recommend that if agencies have planning time and are thinking about staffing, they should utilize certified peer specialists. We found that the certified peer specialists who participate in SOAR are wonderful and they really get involved. That can be a great way to engage with people who may be unsure about getting involved in a benefit program or mainstream services.* "

— Kristin Lupfer
SOAR Project Specialist
State of Georgia PATH Program

A strong relationship with the Social Security office can go a long way

A service provider can work with the local Social Security office to identify someone to work specifically on applications for people experiencing homelessness. This will speed up the application process, because the Social Security office will have an understanding of the specific issues relevant to this population. In Georgia, SSI/SSDI applications are flagged as SOAR, Social

Security meets with the state SOAR team on a quarterly basis, and Social Security staff attend SOAR trainings. In Michigan, Social Security has an agreement to expedite the appeals process for SOAR applications.

If you have a benefits specialist, make sure that she is able to work closely with the PATH providers

In some programs the benefits specialist has the sole role of writing the application and is not expected to engage with consumers. In situations like this, the benefits specialist should work closely with the PATH provider to gather information. This model is used by CUCS and Health Care for the Homeless Milwaukee.

Think about creative ways to engage consumers in the process

It takes several meetings to gather all necessary information to complete a benefits application. Offering assistance with other resources during the meetings, and providing snacks during the visit will meet the person's immediate needs, increase comfort, and help foster a trusting relationship.

Hear what the person isn't saying

Individuals experiencing homelessness may not always verbally express what is going on physically, emotionally, or cognitively. Those implementing SOAR need to be able to glean what people aren't saying and to engage them in a discussion that can better identify what is really going on—is it just back pain or is there also another underlying mental health issue involved?

> " *SOAR works for PATH in Bridgeway's case because there must be 150 people who recognize Donna, the PATH outreach worker, by sight. They know where to find her and she knows how to find them. Combining SOAR and PATH works in this community because of the relationship that the outreach worker has with people who experience homelessness.* "
>
> — Maria Whitford
> **Grants Manager**
> *Bridgeway Center, Inc., Florida*

It is more important to have appropriate referrals than a high volume of referrals

Once other programs find out that a program is implementing SOAR, they may want to refer everyone. This can be difficult because it can take time to sort through the referrals and to find out who is really eligible for benefits. Providers should take some time to talk to community partners beforehand to give them a basic overview of what disabilities qualify individuals for SSI and SSDI.

Documentation is important every step of the way

Accurate records must be kept in order to craft a strong narrative for the application and to track results. Organizations should stress the importance of accurate record keeping and, in some states, "flagging" the applications as SOAR applications. Only with accurate records will programs be able to produce high success rates and document their results.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The first step in moving forward with SOAR is to find out if your state is a SOAR state and if there are any SOAR trainers (http://www.prainc.com/SOAR/soar101/states.asp) in your area. If your state is not implementing SOAR, read *The Ten Steps to a Community SSI Initiative* (http://www.prainc.com/SOAR/community/pdfs/10_steps.pdf) and consider applying or looking for funding to send your staff to Stepping Stones to Recovery training. If you have additional questions about applying to become a SOAR state, contact SOAR@prainc.com.

If your state is already a SOAR state or your program is implementing SOAR, how are things going? Think about ways to reenergize your staff and programs by celebrating successes,

starting a listserv, distributing a newsletter, or hosting a teleconference to discuss common issues. SOAR is easy to get excited about, but filling out benefits applications is tedious. Try to find ways to keep programs and individuals enthusiastic about the process even when the work is frustrating.

Connecting isolated individuals to necessary resources is part of what makes PATH programs unique. For many individuals, benefits are not the end of the process, but a great resource and one of step in their recovery. Many individuals will want to move towards increasing their education and gaining employment. SOAR is a valuable tool for working towards an individual's recovery goals.

REFERENCES

Policy Research Associates. (2008). *SOAR: SSI/SSDI outreach, access, and recovery*. http://www.prainc.com/SOAR/default.asp

Policy Research Associates. (2008). *SOAR states*. http://www.prainc.com/SOAR/soar101/states.asp.

Policy Research Associates. (n.d.). *Ten steps to a community SSI initiative*. http://www.prainc.com/SOAR/community/pdfs/10_steps.pdf.

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RESOURCES

Resources from the PATH TA Center and PATH Providers

PATH Income and Medical Coverage Resource Page

PATH has developed a resource page with information to help providers understand different kinds of benefits and help individuals through the benefits application process.

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=33139.

PATH SOAR Teleconference

In 2007, PATH hosted a teleconference with Deborah Dennis from Policy Research Associates about SOAR. This document contains the slideshow from the presentation with notes.

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=33161.

Center for Urban Community Services Resources

The Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS) has developed several documents that are useful for completing SSI/SSDI applications. These documents are used in the state of New York but provide helpful information for all areas. The documents include:

Becoming a Representative

Explains the value of having an appointed representative for the SSI/SSDI application.

Discharge Summary Template

The New York State (NYS) Office of Mental Health uses this discharge form and it is included in SSI/SSDI applications.

Documentation Tip Sheet

Recommended do's and don'ts to consider when filing an application.

Prioritization form for SSI Applications

Form used by SOAR specialists to help decide how to prioritize cases.

SSA Releases and Authorizations

List of the release and authorization forms that are helpful to include in the SSI/SSDI application.

What to Include from the Applicant's Chart

List of documents to consider including in an SSI/SSDI application.

The above documents are available on the Homelessness Resource Center website.

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=33147

State of Georgia SOAR Website

Georgia will soon have a website specifically created to help connect their SOAR providers. This website will include newsletters and other materials to connect providers and help them implement SOAR.

Direct Link:
http://www.mhddad.dhr.georgia.gov/soar

The Georgia SOAR Network Newsletters

Several newsletters have been distributed to SOAR providers and stakeholders in Georgia. The columns include a case managers corner, SOAR technique of the month, and region updates. These materials will be available on the Georgia SOAR website and are currently available from the Homelessness Resource Center.

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=33345

Resources from Policy Resources Associates (the SOAR TA center)

10 Steps to a Community SSI Initiative

If you are just getting started with SOAR in your community, this document clearly lays out steps and tips for who to involve and what to do.

Direct Link: http://www.prainc.com/SOAR/community/pdfs/10_steps.pdf

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=33140

SSI/SSDI Quality Review Checklist

Completing SSI and SSDI applications requires a lot of attention to detail. This checklist can be used to review applications for thoroughness before they are submitted.

Direct Link: http://www.prainc.com/SOAR/community/pdfs/QualityReviewChecklist.pdf

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=33141

Stepping Stones to Recovery: A Case Manager's Manual for Assisting Adults Who Are Homeless, with Social Security Disability and Supplemental Security Income Applications

This is the manual used by SOAR trained staff across the country. It has information about the application process, how to efficiently document disability, and sample forms from the field.

Direct Link: http://www.prainc.com/SOAR/training/manual.asp

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=33142

Government Websites

Social Security

http://www.socialsecurity.gov/homelessness

DisabilityInfo.gov

http://www.disabilityinfo.gov

GovBenefit.gov

http://www.govbenefits.gov

Other Resources

Understanding Supplemental Security Income
SSI Spotlight on Homelessness 2008 Edition

This Social Security Administration webpage contains answers to frequently asked questions about obtaining SSI/SSDI benefits while experiencing homelessness.

Direct Link: http://www.socialsecurity.gov/ssi/spotlights/spot-homeless.htm

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=33166

Benefits Eligibility Screening Tool (BEST)

This screening tool helps to determine social security eligibility. It does not collect any identifying information and is not an application.

Direct Link: http://connections.govbenefits.gov/ssa_en.portal

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=33143

First Step: On the Path to Benefits for People who are Homeless

This SAMHSA tool offers advice on how to be an effective benefits counselor when working with individuals who are experiencing homelessness. The tools help you keep all of your benefits information in one place and there is information on how to determine eligibility for different resources.

Direct Link: http://www.cms.hhs.gov/apps/firststep/index.html

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=22889

Documenting Disability: Simple Strategies for Medical Providers

This Health Care for the Homeless document is intended to be a resource for medical providers who work with individuals who are homeless or marginally housed and have a disability that qualifies individuals for SSI or SSDI. It explains the disability criteria and ways that medical providers can help expedite the disability process.

Direct Link: http://www.nhchc.org/DocumentingDisability.pdf

Homelessness Resource Center Record:
http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/View.aspx?id=32861

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WHAT IS PATH?

Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness

The PATH Program—or Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness—was authorized by the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Amendments Act of 1990. PATH funds community-based outreach, mental health and substance abuse services, case management, and limited housing services for people experiencing serious mental illnesses—including those with co-occurring substance use disorders—who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of becoming homeless.

PATH funds stimulate state & local contributions

PATH funds are worth more than their face value because they are matched with state and local resources. For every $3 in federal funds, state or local agencies must put forward $1 in cash or in-kind services. At a minimum, a $52 million Federal allocation would result in a $17 million match. In some states PATH funds and the state and local match are the only resources specifically for serving people experiencing homelessness and mental illnesses.

PATH

Projects for Assistance in
Transition from Homelessness

PATH providers deliver innovative services

PATH providers work with service delivery systems and embrace practices that work. These include:

○ Partnering with housing first and permanent supportive housing programs

○ Providing flexible consumer-directed and recovery-oriented services to meet consumers where they are in their recovery

○ Employing consumers or providing consumer-run programs

○ Partnering with health care providers, including Health Care for the Homeless to integrate mental health and medical services

○ Assertively improving access to employment

○ Improving access to benefits, especially through SSI/SSDI Outreach, Advocacy, and Recovery (SOAR)

○ Using technology such as PDAs, electronic records, and HMIS

PATH providers are strong community partners

PATH providers and State Contacts are involved in local and regional planning efforts to end homelessness, including Continuum of Care, 10-Year Plans to End Homelessness, and other planning efforts. PATH providers and State Contacts work to ensure that services are coordinated and available to people experiencing homelessness.

For more information about PATH, please visit
http://pathprogram.samhsa.gov

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